

PERSPECTIVES ON VISUAL LEARNING, VOL. 4

How Images Behave

Petra Aczél / András Benedek / Kristóf Nyíri
(eds.)

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Hungarian Academy of Sciences
Budapest University of Technology and Economics

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Perspectives on Visual Learning

Edited by Petra Aczél, András Benedek and Kristóf Nyíri

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**The Power of Images
– Beyond the Logic of Action
Arguments for the Intrinsic Power of Images**

A) Power of Images: Action or Mediality?

Which theory and concepts do we need to understand the power of images?

The state of research and the majority opinion in the philosophy of images is a logic of *action*: “we” act with images and images are just instruments and objects of actions. The implication is that any “power” of images is just and only the power of “users” (makers, perceivers, distributors etc.): i.e. the power of persons or human subjects. – This would then be the meaning of the question “how images behave”¹.

In the tradition of speech-acts, significant positions who hold this view are Klaus Sachs-Hombach and Oliver Robert Scholz.

In the tradition of *old* phenomenology (i.e. Husserl), Lambert Wiesing’s is a prominent position in the field of philosophy.

¹ The turn of phrase “digital images behave very differently from photographs” can be found already in W. J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992, p. 173.

In the tradition of cognitive semantics and conceptual metaphors or images the case seems to be similar – if I am not mistaken.

This model of persons or subjects, *acting* always and *sometimes acting with images*, is at first glance self-evident and fits the usual patterns of cognition and understanding. “We”, human agents, are acting and behave badly or well, with or without images.

But – “How do images behave?” is a question going *against* and *far beyond* this pattern of thought. The decisive research question is not only, “Do we have power over our imagery?” (of course we don’t...), but “*What power do our words have over our images, what power have images over words?*“ (Phrase taken from the VLC9 call for papers.)

But which model makes us speak and ask in that way?

Which background theory lets us understand images as “behaving somehow”?

One answer has already been given by a long-term research project on the intersections of word and image and their powers:

Philipp Stoellger/Martina Kumlehn (eds.), [Wortmacht – Machtwort: Deutungsmachtkonflikte in und um Religion](#), Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2017, 450 p. (Series: *Interpretation Interdisziplinär*, vol. 16.)

Philipp Stoellger/Martina Kumlehn (eds.), [Bildmacht – Machtbild: Deutungsmacht des Bildes – Wie Bilder glauben machen](#), Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2018, 488 p. (Series: *Interpretation Interdisziplinär*, vol. 17.)

The background is a graduate-school research on power, namely the “soft power” in and of communication, visual and verbal communication:

Philipp Stoellger (ed.), [Deutungsmacht: Religion und belief systems in Deutungsmachtkonflikten](#), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014, 624 p.



Here the relevant thesis is: to understand the power of images as Deutungsmacht: as the power of showing, and thereby letting us and making us see, perceive, feel and act in the line of the image. It's a modal (making possible) and medial power as *potential*.

How do timages do so?

By their medial power: they show something as something and let us see, make us see in their way. If they are powerful, we share their showing, i.e. they frame our perception. That is what powerful media do: they frame our perceptions (recall Fritz Heider, Niklas Luhmann and others).

B) Three Modes of Power

“What power have images?” was the question.

Let me exemplify three modes of power in four examples:

1. Election campaigns

An election campaign is made with and by images (to produce “an image” of the candidate). It is a mode of “image politics”: a use of images by politics to make us see the one and only candidate as the

best of all possible. Behind the campaign stands political (democratic *potestas*) and financial power (non-democratic *potestas*).

These *images behave well* when they function as submissive staff or servants of “the king”.

They are objects which are used to achieve an aim. And the better they function, the better they are.

The pattern is quite simple: with a strong power “from above” (political, economical) the images are used (produced, distributed) as means to an end. Such images are “weak media”, mere instruments to produce and distribute a way to see (the candidate as the best) and to make the addressees behave (elect) in the wished way.

To achieve this is of course not as simple as the pattern, but means hard work with a lot professional experience, money, and will to power.

2. Art Market

Someone is making images, however they may look like. And he wants to sell them to earn a living – and probably with the wish of becoming a famous artist. Therefore, he gets involved in the art market. His images become a product in a special economic field: given to a gallery, exhibited for sale, together with rituals of “value-making”: prominent places, prominent speakers and writers, prominent neighbours in the exhibitions etc.

The power of the image is then produced by a system called “art-market”. The empowerment derives from decisions of the involved “prominent” actors. But – the success at last is made by the customers: to buy or not to buy is the final question. If the images are bought, they get recognition. And the higher the price, the higher is the recognition.

These images behave well when they function as valuable stuff for sellers and customers. They are objects which are used to achieve the aim of economy. And the better they function, the better they are.

The pattern is again quite simple: the power of the image derives at last *from below*, from the *recognition*, the customers. Their decision produces the value and power of the image. In some degree

it is a democratic model of empowerment: what is bought, is empowered. The decision is made by the customers. Remember Hannah Arendts model of power by recognition, or Max Weber's concept of charisma made by the ascription of the admirers. Not the image by itself is powerful, but the surrounding decisions make it so. And power is recognition resulting in economic value.

But, of course, the "aesthetic quality" of the image is at stake as well. To judge about this "MacGuffin" (Hitchcock), this "je ne sais quoi", is another question with another pattern: that the image "in itself" has an intrinsic quality which makes it powerful – for centuries. Wherefrom this quality comes is a point of dispute. We like to believe that it is the great artist (like Gerhard Richter), or more sceptically that it is just the market and the art-market, or that it is "only" the contingent recognition of customers and admirers.

To see the intrinsic power of the image as a consequence of human agents and systemic operations means: to see the image and its power as a consequence of personal and systemic power.

That's possible of course. But – whether it is the image in itself or the agents and systems (or with ANT: actors and networks), in the consequence the image *is* powerful – loaded with power, which "it has forever" or at least for some years or a minute of fame.

3. *Caricatures*

To avoid the conflicts about "intrinsic aesthetic value" (in which I myself do like to believe...), I refer to caricatures resp. political cartoons. Imagine a cartoon of Helmut Kohl, his head as a great meaty pear – which became widespread in Germany and even a common name for him: simply "pear".

What has happened here?

One could say that the *inventor* and creator of this image was ingenious and made a powerful image with his aesthetic power.

One could say that the *media* of distribution, namely *Der Spiegel*, is a powerful mass-medium, which empowered the image.



One could say that the *public sphere*, the addressees, empowered the image by their use and reuse of it, by their recognition.

And one could say that the “*subject*” of the image, Kohl, made the image powerful by his prominence and political power.

All of that is true of course.

But – all four answers would again reduce the power to agents and systems, actors and networks: extrinsic powers as empowerment of the image. The image remains an object and instrument of communication, and its power is just a consequence of these conditions “from above” or “from below”.

Such images behave well when they function as submissive instruments of political critique. Then again, they are objects which are used to achieve an aim. And the better they function, the better they are.

Or – could it be that these images behave well when they *don't* behave *well*, are *insubmissive*, *insubordinate* and *rebellious*? They are “submitting” the king (i.e. subjugating), but are not submissive to him.

Could it be that the caricature has got its recognition by its *conciseness*, its brilliant and perfect “showing Kohl as a pear” and showing “the pear as Kohl”? With Ernst Cassirer one may call that “*symbolische Prägnanz*”: a synthesis in and by perception, a “pregnant” form of perception. Once the image is seen, immediately and

without my “acting”, Kohl is seen as pear – and forever will be seen by this iconic metaphor (for everyone whoever has seen the cartoon). And even the usual and innocent pears on the tree or in the supermarket are influenced by this mode of perception. Once we’ve seen Kohl as a pear, we cannot avoid to see a pear as Kohl – a little at least. The power of the images seems to “bewitch” our perception. The image operates like a perception-altering drug.

4. Caricature by Accident

The *self*-dynamics of an image and its power to change the way of perception can be exemplified by images which operate against the original intention, i.e. unintentional caricatures.

Remember – or imagine – the Reformation jubilee 2017, celebrating Luther and the global protestantisms. The jubilee was promoted by images and a lot of “Luther-merchandizing” with promotional articles.

Luther – with his critique of the images and his generous tolerance – became “an image”: a saint, an effigy (effigies), a puppet, at last a *squeaky duck*:



One may see here, in the duck, a revenge of the image against its despisers.

Luther as image – became imprisoned in what he despised.

And one can see an unintentional effect as well. The image has the power of taking revenge, imprison and caricature its subject – by accident.

And one may enforce this power by a little manipulation: Luther's image becomes a bit infernal: Luther in the hell of his image...

C) Revision and Prospects

There are at least *two ways* of understanding the self-dynamics of images, i.e. their intrinsic power:

One may say their power comes from agents, systems, structures and “networks”, but once the image is “loaded” with power by the extrinsic factors, it *has* this power. That's an “irenic” model, fitting the usual patterns of thought (mentioned above). But – once the image is loaded, it has an eternal “afterlife” (Nachleben, to recall A. Warburg). It is then a “high potential” framing the perception of the later generations.

The stronger model is to presuppose that media-like images are real factors in the field of communication and interaction. It is not just “loaded” by other powers but is powerful itself. For example: it is not only used to point at and to show something, but it is showing, showing itself, hiding a lot, and has a performance “by its own”: it lets us, and makes us, see in a way.

Exactly this stronger view is held and defended by prominent theories, like Aby Warburg, Horst Bredekamp, John Michael Krois, Gottfried Boehm, Hans Belting or William John Thomas Mitchell. But the “three B's” and the others are blamed – by the traditionalists – to believe in magic and witchcraft: When they speak of an “image-act” (Bredekamp), or of the “moving image” (Boehm), when they ask “What do images want?” (Mitchell) – they would be saying mere nonsense. Speaking about images as agents with a “will” and “behaviour” is blamed to be a primitive anthropomorphism.

The conflict in image-theory is of course a conflict in politics of science, of persons, of institutions and traditions. But it is in its core a *power-conflict*: is power a human property of agents – or are there other forms, figures and factors with power and efficiency? Is the human actor the “sovereign” in the visual field, governing images and using them? Or is the image an “autonomous” actor and factor as well?

One may object that this is not a power-conflict, but a conflict in the *concept* of power. But then the traditionalists forget a decisive concept: not just personal power (of agents as *potestas*; or of agents by recognition: *auctoritas* and charisma) but of factors, things and media: *potentia* as power and making possible (and impossible).

If images can unfold such a medial power – to let us and make us see as they show – is the consequence then justified to say: all images are powerful in such a way?

Evidently not. That’s why one has to draw a distinction: of weak and strong images (not as an aesthetic and normative, but as a descriptive difference).

But whether an image is strong or weak in that meaning, is defined not by the image alone. The factors of image-power are hybrid and multidimensional: Agents and sociality, history and situation, other media and structures. All the named factors come back – but *not to deny and replace the self-dynamics of images, but as an embedding of the power of an image.*

The image’s power over perception, cognition, emotion and communication *cannot* be understood sufficiently by the logic of human action or the logic of anonymous structures. It is another logic of power: the *logic of mediality* with the self-dynamics of media.

On the one hand this sounds trivial: of course, media “have” their own dynamics. Every computer-user knows that. But to conceptualize this experience implies:

1. A *concept of mediality* not completely reducible to agents and structures, and
2. a *concept of power*, not just of powerful acting subjects from above or from below.

Dynamics is the keyword: in Greek it's "*dynamis*", in Latin it's "*potentia*". And that's not merely *possibility*, but a modal power – as we know from the discussions on omnipotentia or impotentia (Giorgio Agamben).

Images' power is their potential impact.

They can have an impact on our behaviour, i.e. our way of life and mode of perception. And that's not just "our" power of recognition, but in this game the image with its own dynamic is a factor: its power.

The VLC9 conference-question "How images behave?" then reveals a deeper meaning: They can behave in a way that they *make us behave*.

Postscriptum

"Ein Bild hielt uns gefangen" (an image held us captive), Wittgenstein once wrote.²

Wittgenstein – like the above mentioned prominent image-theorists (Boehm etc.) – seems to believe in witchcraft and magic: in the power of an image (here a verbal image) to imprison us.

The conference-question "How images behave?" then gets a dark side of meaning:

If images behave, we need an image-ethics (and politics).

And if they misbehave sometimes, their power can become painful: a question of violence. How images can violate – would be a further prospect. But don't forget the bright side: May images be as powerful as to liberate us?

Some biblical images like the Exodus and the parables of the kingdom seem to be so powerful – not by their producers, not just by their readers and their recognition, but the stories and parables can move and affect, can promise and present what they are speaking of. Some images are as powerful as to liberate.

² "Ein *Bild* hielt uns gefangen. Und heraus konnten wir nicht, denn es lag in unserer Sprache, und sie schien es uns nur unerbittlich zu wiederholen." (*Philosophische Untersuchungen*, § 115, cf. *Eine Philosophische Betrachtung*, § 60.)